



US faces wave of omicron deaths in coming weeks, models say

By CARLA K. JOHNSON

AP Medical Writer

The fast-moving omicron variant may cause less severe disease on average, but COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. are climbing and modelers forecast 50,000 to 300,000 more Americans could die by the time the wave subsides in mid-March.

The seven-day rolling average for daily new COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. has been trending upward since mid-November, reaching nearly 1,700 on Jan. 17 — still below the peak of 3,300 in January 2021. COVID-19 deaths among nursing home residents started rising slightly two weeks ago, although still at a rate 10 times less than last year before most residents were vaccinated.

Despite signs omicron causes milder disease on average, the unprecedented level of infection spreading through the country, with

cases still soaring in many states, means many vulnerable people will become severely sick. If the higher end of projections comes to pass, that would push total U.S. deaths from COVID-19 over 1 million by early spring.

"A lot of people are still going to die because of how transmissible omicron has been," said University of South Florida epidemiologist Jason Salemi. "It unfortunately is going to get worse before it gets better." Morgues are starting to run out of space in Johnson County, Kansas, said Dr. Sanmi Areola, director of the health department. More than 30 residents have died in the county this year, the vast majority of them unvaccinated. But the notion that a generally less severe variant could still take the lives of thousands of people has been difficult for health experts to convey. The math



of it — that a small percentage of a very high number of infections can yield a very high number of deaths — is difficult to visualize. "Overall, you're going to see more sick people even if you as an individual have a lower chance of being

sick," said Katriona Shea of Pennsylvania State University, who co-leads a team that pulls together several pandemic models and shares the combined projections with the White House. The wave of deaths heading for the United

States will crest in late January or early February, Shea said. In early February, weekly deaths could equal or exceed the delta peak, and possibly even surpass the previous U.S. peak in deaths last year.

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Ex-NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio won't run for governor

By MICHELLE L. PRICE

Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced Tuesday he will not run for governor, but will instead devote himself to fighting inequality in New York.

His decision to not enter the Democratic primary further strengthens the campaign of Gov. Kathy Hochul, who already has a commanding start locking up endorsements and fundraising.

"No, I'm not going to be running for governor of New York state. But I am going to devote every fiber of my being to fight inequality in the state of New York," the former mayor said in a video posted on Twitter.

De Blasio did not offer more detail about how he plans to fight inequality.

De Blasio, who left office at the end of 2021, had been hinting for months about a 2022 run for governor, saying he would like to stay in public service and is proud of his eight years as mayor of the largest city in the country.



De Blasio, 60, frequently clashed with former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who resigned from office in 2021 amid allegations he sexually harassed numerous women.

Hochul, who was Cuomo's lieutenant governor and became the first woman to serve as New York's governor when she took over for Cuomo in August, faces two main challengers in the Democratic primary. Jumaane Williams, who serves as a citizen ombudsman in his elected office of New York City Public Advocate, is also in the primary race, as is U.S. Rep. Tom

Suozzi, a Democrat who represents Long Island and has touted his work to get Congress to raise a tax deduction cap that benefits a high-tax state like New York.

State Attorney General Letitia James, who investigated the allegations against Cuomo, dropped out after a short-lived bid and opted to instead run for reelection.

De Blasio — and Williams — would have counted on a base of voter support in Brooklyn, but Hochul has been making frequent trips to New York City and hobnobbing with Brooklyn

Democrats, in particular, to shore up support. The Buffalo native had won endorsements from key figures in de Blasio's turf, like the chair of the Brooklyn Democratic Party and the Manhattan borough president.

De Blasio had been eyeing a campaign for months. He filed paperwork in early November with the state Board of Elections to create a fundraising committee — New Yorkers for a Fair Future — to allow him to raise money for a statewide campaign. In November, he unveiled a campaign-style statewide education plan calling for universal pre-K and "3-K," and stayed coy in a series of interviews as to whether he intended to run. In 2013, de Blasio became the first Democrat to serve as New York City mayor since 1993 in a city where Democrats outnumber Republicans 7 to 1. He

came into office with a liberal agenda but struggled with unsparing and mocking tabloid headlines during his time running the nation's largest city.

De Blasio, who was born in Manhattan and raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts, launched a short-lived presidential campaign in 2019, when he kicked off his first day as a candidate by trading insults with Trump. But he faced pushback from skeptical New Yorkers over his bid, punctuated by him failing to qualify for several debates, flubbing a campaign appearance in Miami by quoting Che Guevara and a technical glitch that distorted his voice when speaking to union workers in Iowa via videoconference.

Before serving as mayor, de Blasio was both a public advocate and a city council member. □

Continued from Front

Some unknown portion of these deaths are among people infected with the delta variant, but experts say omicron is also claiming lives.

"This is omicron driven," Shea said of the coming wave of deaths. The combined models project 1.5 million Americans will be hospitalized and 191,000 will die from mid-December through mid-March. Taking into account the uncertainty in the models, U.S. deaths during the omicron wave could range from 58,000 to 305,000.

Yet, it's become increasingly clear that the risk from omicron is lower than from previous variants. New evidence from nearly 70,000 patients in Southern California suggests omicron is causing milder illness than delta.

A study, posted online and cited during a recent White House briefing, found patients with omicron had a 53% lower risk of hospitalization with respiratory symptoms, a 74% lower risk of ICU admission, and a 91% lower risk of death. The study, which has not yet been

peer reviewed, comes from researchers at Kaiser Permanente and University of California, Berkeley. "It's hard for me to say straight out it's good news," said study co-author Sara Y. Tartof, a Kaiser Permanente research scientist. "Maybe there's good news in the sense that if you are infected your chance of becoming severely ill are decreased, but from a societal perspective it's a very heavy burden for us. It remains a serious situation, and we need to maintain practices and behaviors we know protect us."

Overburdened hospitals could also contribute to more deaths, said Marc Lipsitch of Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and scientific director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's forecasting center. "In places with extremely short staffing and overloads of patients, as the medical professionals have been telling us, the quality of care begins to suffer," Lipsitch said. "That may also lead to higher death rates, but that's not in any of the models that I'm aware of." □

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US plans \$50B wildfire fight where forests meet suburbia

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The Biden administration plans to significantly expand efforts to stave off catastrophic wildfires that have torched areas of the U.S. West by more aggressively thinning forests around areas called "hotspots" where nature and neighborhoods collide.

As climate change heats up and dries out the West, administration officials said they have crafted a \$50 billion plan to more than double the use of controlled fires and logging to reduce trees and other vegetation that serves as tinder in the most at-risk areas.

They said work will begin this year and the plan will focus on regions where out-of-control blazes have wiped out neighborhoods and sometimes entire communities — including California's Sierra Nevada mountains, the east side of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, and portions of Arizona, Oregon and Washington state. Homes keep getting built in fire-prone areas, even as conditions that stoke blazes get worse.

"You're going to have forest fires. The question is how catastrophic do those fires have to be," Agriculture Sec. Tom Vilsack told the Associated Press in advance of a planned public announcement of the administration's wildfire strategy at a Tuesday event in Phoenix.

"The time to act is now if we want to ultimately over time change the trajectory of these fires," Vilsack said. Specific projects weren't immediately released, and it's not clear who would pay for the full scope of work envisioned across almost 80,000 square miles (200,000 square kilometers) — an area almost as large as Idaho. Much of that area is privately owned or controlled by states or tribes.

Reaching that goal would require an estimated \$20 billion over 10 years for work on national forests and \$30 billion for work on other

federal, state, tribal and private lands, said Vilsack spokesperson Kate Waters. Vilsack acknowledged that the new effort will also require a "paradigm shift" within the U.S. Forest Service, from an agency devoted to stamping out fires, into one that uses what some Native Americans call "good fire" on forests and rangeland to prevent even larger blazes.

Forest Service planning documents indicate the work will focus on "hotspots" that make up only 10% of the fire-prone areas across the U.S. but account for 80% of risk to communities because of their population densities and locations. The recently-passed federal infrastructure bill put a down payment on the initiative — \$3.2 billion over five years that Vilsack said will get work going quickly. Wildfire expert John Abatzoglou said lessening fire dangers on the amount of land envisioned under the administration's plan is a "lofty goal" that represents even more acreage than burned over the past 10 years across the West. But Abatzoglou, a University of California Merced engineering professor, said the focus on wildfire hazards closest to communities makes sense.

"Our scorecard for fire should be about lives saved rather than acres that didn't burn," he said. Dealing with western wildfires is becoming increasingly urgent as they get more destructive and intense. There have been rare winter blazes in recent weeks, including infernos in Montana and Colorado, where a wildfire on Dec. 30 tore through a suburban area and destroyed more than 1,000 buildings, leaving one person dead and a second still missing.

And there's no signs of a let-up in conditions that keep the risk of wildfires extremely high. A long-term "megadrought" is gripping the region and scientists forecast temperatures will keep rising as more climate-changing carbon emissions are pumped into

the atmosphere.

The impact stretches far beyond the western U.S. because massive smoke plumes at the height of wildfire season in the U.S. and Canada spread the health effects across North America — sending unhealthy pollution last summer to major cities from San Francisco to Philadelphia and Toronto.

For decades the primary approach to containing and extinguishing forest fires was to try to stamp them out. The efforts have been similar to massive, military-like campaigns, including planes, fleets of heavy equipment and thousands of firefighting personnel and support workers dispatched to the fire zones.

However, fires are a part of the natural cycle for most forests, so putting them out leaves stands of trees that don't burn surrounded by dead wood, underbrush and other highly flammable fuels — a worst-case scenario when blazes ignite.

Critics have said U.S. agencies are too fixated on fighting fires and that trying to solve the problem by cutting more trees will only harm the forests. In South Dakota's Black Hills, for example, government biologists have said that too many trees dying from a combination of insects, fire and logging have made current timber harvest levels unsustainable.

But Vilsack said a combination of tree thinning

and intentionally set fires to clear undergrowth that are called prescribed burns will make the forests healthier in the long run while reducing the threat to public safety. Forests thinned near Lake Tahoe and its tourism gateway community of South Lake Tahoe were credited with slowing the advance of the massive Caldor Fire last summer that destroyed almost 800 homes and prompted evacuations of tens of thousands of residents and tourists.

A similar phenomenon played out during Oregon's Bootleg fire last July, which burned more than 600 square miles (1,500 square kilometers) but did less damage in forest that was thinned over the past decade. □



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Majority of US states pursue nuclear power for emission cuts

By JENNIFER McDERMOTT
Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) —

As climate change pushes states in the U.S. to dramatically cut their use of fossil fuels, many are coming to the conclusion that solar, wind and other renewable power sources might not be enough to keep the lights on.

Nuclear power is emerging as an answer to fill the gap as states transition away from coal, oil and natural gas to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and stave off the worst effects of a warming planet. The renewed interest in nuclear comes as companies, including one started by Microsoft founder Bill Gates, are developing smaller, cheaper reactors that could supplement the power grid in communities across the U.S.

Nuclear power comes with its own set of potential problems, especially radioactive waste that can remain dangerous for thousands of years. But supporters say the risks can be minimized and that the energy source will be essential to stabilize power supplies as the world tries to move away from carbon dioxide-emitting fossil fuels.

Tennessee Valley Authority President and CEO Jeff



Lyash puts it simply: You can't significantly reduce carbon emissions without nuclear power.

"At this point in time, I don't see a path that gets us there without preserving the existing fleet and building new nuclear," Lyash said.

The federally owned utility is adding solar capacity, but also operates three nuclear plants and plans to test a small reactor. By 2050, it hopes to become net zero, which means the amount of greenhouse gases produced is no more than the

amount removed from the atmosphere.

An Associated Press survey of the energy policies in all 50 states and the District of Columbia found that a strong majority—about two-thirds—say nuclear, in one fashion or another, will help take the place of fossil fuels. That momentum could lead to the first expansion of nuclear reactor construction in the U.S. in more than three decades. Roughly one-third of the states and the District of Columbia say they have no plans to incorporate nu-

clear power in their green energy goals, instead leaning heavily on renewables. They pointed to advances in energy storage using batteries, investments in the grid for high-voltage interstate transmission, energy efficiency efforts to reduce demand and power provided by hydroelectric dams. The split over nuclear power mirrors a similar debate unfolding in Europe. The Biden administration has tried to take aggressive steps to reduce greenhouse gases in the U.S. The \$1 trillion infrastructure

package passed last year will allocate about \$2.5 billion for advanced reactor demonstration projects.

U.S. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm told the AP the administration wants to get to zero-carbon electricity, and that means nuclear, hydropower, geothermal, wind and solar.

"We want it all," she said.

Nuclear technology still comes with significant risks that other low-carbon energy sources don't, said Edwin Lyman, director of nuclear power safety at the Union of Concerned Scientists. He's concerned the industry might cut corners on safety and security to save money and compete. The group does not oppose using nuclear power, but wants to make sure it's safe. The U.S. also has no long-term plan for managing or disposing the hazardous waste, and there remains the danger of accidents or targeted attacks, Lyman said. Nuclear disasters at Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and more recently, Fukushima, Japan, in 2011 provide an enduring warning.

Nuclear power already provides about 20% of electricity in the U.S., or about half the nation's carbon-free energy. □

Jim Obergefell, face of gay marriage, to run for Ohio House

By JOHN SEEWER
Associated Press

TOLEDO, Ohio (AP) —

Gay rights advocate Jim Obergefell, whose name was atop the U.S. Supreme Court case legalizing same-sex marriage nationwide, announced Tuesday that

he's running for a seat in the Ohio legislature.

Obergefell, a Democrat, said he wants Ohio to be a place where people feel they have equal opportunity.

He was the lead plaintiff in the landmark 2015 ruling

that put an end to same-sex marriage bans, turning him into one of the most visible figures in the marriage-equality movement.

Obergefell will run for the Ohio House in a district that includes his hometown of Sandusky and has been dominated by Republicans the past eight years. Obergefell moved back to his hometown in 2021 to be closer to family.

"I think I've proven with my fight for marriage equality that I don't mind being an underdog," he said.

Obergefell said the area of northern Ohio he wants to represent has struggled to attract good paying jobs and that too many people have been forced to leave. He said two of his biggest

priorities are improving the region's job outlook and protecting Lake Erie, a major driver of the area's economy.

His path to becoming an "accidental" activist began when he and his partner, John Arthur, were unable to wed in Ohio because of their home state's ban on same-sex marriage. At the time, Obergefell was living in Cincinnati and hadn't been much involved in politics.

Obergefell and Arthur, who was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease, decided to get married in Maryland after the Supreme Court struck down part of the Defense of Marriage Act in 2013. But Ohio's ban meant Obergefell would not be listed as

Arthur's surviving spouse on his death certificate.

They won a temporary injunction and when Arthur died a little over three months after they were married, Obergefell was listed as his spouse on his death certificate.

But the legal victory was overturned, setting the stage for the Supreme Court's historic decision. By a 5-4 vote, the court ruled on June 26, 2015, that same-sex couples can exercise the fundamental right to marry. Following the ruling, Obergefell has worked for a group that advocates for LGBTQ families and spoken out on transgender and civil rights in appearances, interviews and on social media. □



Malta legislator becomes 3rd female EU Parliament president

By RAF CASERT

BRUSSELS (AP) — Roberta Metsola, a Christian Democrat from Malta, was elected president of the European Union's parliament Tuesday, putting women in three of the four biggest jobs in the 27-nation bloc. Metsola succeeds Italian Socialist David Sassoli, who died last week. She is only the third woman elected to the post. Her birthday was Tuesday, and at age 43, she is the European Parliament's youngest president. Metsola was the candidate of the parliament's biggest group, and she received 458 of the 616 votes cast Tuesday. She had already been acting president since Sassoli's Jan. 11 death.

"I know that having the first female president of this house since 1999 matters both inside and outside these rooms, but it must go further," Metsola told the plenary. "Our institution commits to having more diversity, gender equality, guaranteeing women's rights, all our rights must be reaffirmed."

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen could not attend the parliamentary session since she is in a COVID-19 quarantine. Another woman, Christine



Lagarde, runs the powerful European Central Bank, which has vast sway over the EU economy.

The European Council, which represents the governments of the 27 member states, is lead by a man, Charles Michel, who as council president hosts the summits of the bloc's leaders.

The presidential election for the second half of the legislature had long been planned, but it became more poignant after the death of Sassoli, who had been sick for several months and decided not to seek another 2 1/2-year

term.

Metsola will lead an EU institution which has become more powerful over the years and been instrumental in charting the course of the 27-nation bloc on issues such as the digital economy, climate change and Brexit.

Known as a committed bridge-builder between parties, Metsola said she would stick to Sassoli's style of work.

"David fought hard to bring people around the same table. It is that commitment to holding the constructive forces in Europe together that I will build on," she said.

She referred to giants of European post-war politics like German Christian Democrat Helmut Kohl and French Socialist Francois Mitterrand to overcome party divisions and give her guidance.

"My appeal is to rediscover the purpose of Kohl and Mitterrand and leave behind the entrenchment of the past as we look to the future," she said.

And reflecting on the European Parliament's last female president, France's Nicole Fontaine, who presided from 1999 to 2002, Metsola vowed that "it will not be another two de-

cades until the next woman is standing here."

The European Parliament represents the EU's 450 million citizens and refers to itself as "the heart of European democracy." The parliament has long been the lesser EU institution compared to the executive European Commission and the European Council. For many years, the parliament, which sits in Strasbourg, France, and Brussels was seen as a money-guzzling talking shop where politicians who had served their national purpose often were sent.

As it gained decision-making powers, though, the legislature it has become a more forceful player on the European scene. Metsola wants to continue that trend.

"We need to strengthen it. We cannot be afraid of reform," she said. "The next part of the mandate will see a window of opportunity to make our parliament more modern, more effective and more efficient. We must seize the opportunity."

Metsola is the first politician from Malta, a Mediterranean archipelago in the central Mediterranean with a population of just over half a million, to hold such a high position in the EU. □

COVID-19 health emergency could be over this year, WHO says

GENEVA (AP) — The head of emergencies at the World Health Organization said Tuesday that the worst of the coronavirus pandemic deaths, hospitalizations and lockdowns could be over this year if huge inequities in vaccinations and medicines are

addressed quickly.

Dr. Michael Ryan, speaking during a panel discussion on vaccine equity hosted by the World Economic Forum, said "we may never end the virus" because such pandemic viruses "end up becoming part of the ecosystem."

But "we have a chance to end the public health emergency this year if we do the things that we've been talking about," he said.

WHO has slammed the imbalance in COVID-19 vaccination between rich and poor countries as a catastrophic moral failure. Fewer than 10% of people in lower-income countries have received one dose of COVID-19 vaccine.

Ryan told the virtual gathering of world and business leaders that if vaccines and other tools aren't shared fairly, the tragedy of the virus, which has so far killed more than 5.5 million people worldwide, would continue.

"What we need to do is get

to low levels of disease incidence with maximum vaccination of our populations, so nobody has to die," Ryan said. "The issue is: It's the death. It's the hospitalizations. It's the disruption of our social, economic, political systems that's caused the tragedy not the virus."

Ryan also waded into the growing debate about whether COVID-19 should be considered endemic, a label some countries like Spain have called for to help better live with the virus, or still a pandemic involving intensified measures that many countries have taken to fight the spread.

"Endemic malaria kills hundreds of thousands of people; endemic HIV; endemic

violence in our inner cities. Endemic in itself does not mean good. Endemic just means it's here forever," he said.

Public health officials have warned it is highly unlikely COVID-19 will be eliminated and say it will continue to kill people, though at much lower levels, even after it becomes endemic.

Fellow panelist Gabriela Bucher, executive director of the anti-poverty organization Oxfam International, cited the "enormous urgency" of fairer distribution of vaccines and the need for large-scale production. She said resources to fight the pandemic were being "hoarded by a few companies and a few shareholders." □



Russia shortens COVID-19 isolation to 7 days as cases surge

By DASHA LITVINOVA

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian authorities are shortening the required isolation period for people infected with COVID-19 from 14 to seven days as the country faces another surge of COVID-19 cases, this time driven by the highly contagious omicron variant.

Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova, who runs the country's coronavirus task force, said Tuesday that health officials were "optimizing our approaches to quarantine and testing of our citizens, including shortening the quarantine period to seven days."

Golikova added that other policy changes will be adopted in the coming days, without elaborating. She also didn't explain the rationale for cutting the isolation period. Earlier rules required a two-week isolation period for those who test positive, with a mandatory follow-up test on day 11.

Russia already has by far Europe's worst death toll in the pandemic at over 322,000 deaths by its official tally, a number that other statistics suggest is a signifi-



cant undercount.

The daily number of coronavirus infections confirmed in Russia has doubled over the past week, going from over 15,000 on Jan. 10 to 31,252 on Tuesday. Officials say the surge could end up as the country's biggest yet but so far haven't announced any major restrictions to stem it. Anna Popova, the head of Russian public health watchdog Rospotrebnadzor, said last week that new daily cases might reach six figures. President Vladimir

Putin has said that Russia has "a couple of weeks" to prepare for the unprecedented wave.

Golikova said Tuesday that 1,682 omicron cases have been officially confirmed in Russia so far, but the actual number is much higher. The new variant is already dominating in Moscow, the outlying region and St. Petersburg, Russia's second largest city, she said. Rospotrebnadzor said a total of 1,241 omicron cases have been registered in Moscow as of Tuesday.

The recent surge of infections hasn't so far led to a spike in hospitalizations, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin noted Tuesday.

"So far we are not seeing the same proportion of severe cases as with delta," Mishustin said, adding "we need to be prepared for any course of events."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday that authorities were not discussing another nationwide lockdown.

Russia had only one na-

tional lockdown, in 2020, although many Russians were ordered to stay off work for a week in October 2021 amid a jump in reported cases and deaths. On Friday, the government decided to indefinitely postpone introducing restrictions for unvaccinated people, which would have been extremely unpopular among vaccine-hesitant Russians.

Just about half of Russia's population of 146 million has been fully vaccinated, even though Russia boasted about being the first country in the world to approve and roll out a domestically developed coronavirus vaccine.

In Moscow, Mayor Sergei Sobyanin extended his orders obligating companies to keep at least 30% of staff working from home and people older than 60 to stay at home until April 1, but said at this point there was no need for any additional restrictions.

The Russian capital on Tuesday reported 8,342 new infections, more than twice the figure just a week ago. □

Colombia's Ingrid Betancourt announces presidential run

By MANUEL RUEDA Associated Press

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) — Colombian politician Ingrid Betancourt, who was held as a hostage for six years by Colombia's largest guerrilla group, said on Tuesday that she will be running for her country's presidency.

The announcement comes almost two decades after Betancourt was kidnapped by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia while also campaigning for the country's top office for the Green Oxygen Party, a movement she founded while she was a congresswoman.

"Today I am here to finish off what I started with many of you in 2002" Betancourt said in a conference room where she announced her candidacy. "I am here to

claim the rights of 51 million Colombians who are not finding justice, because we live in a system designed to reward criminals."

Betancourt spent six years in guerrilla camps deep in the Amazon jungle, where sometimes rebel fighters would tie her to a tree with metal chains to prevent her from escaping. Her proof of life videos, in which she asked officials to investigate the circumstances that led to her own kidnapping, and then pleaded with the government to resume peace talks with the FARC rebels were aired widely in Colombia and abroad.

The politician became a symbol of international campaigns seeking peace talks in Colombia and the liberation of FARC hostag-

es. But her time in captivity ended in 2008 through a military operation, where Colombian soldiers disguised as humanitarian workers snatched Betancourt and several other hostages from the FARC without firing a single bullet. Betancourt withdrew from public life after being freed spending much of her time with family in France. But she returned to Colombia's political scene last year as the country prepared for elections that will be held in May. While announcing her run for the presidency Betancourt said she would fight to end impunity for corrupt politicians as well as the economic disparity that have long afflicted Colombia, where protests against inequality shook up local politics last year. □

Egypt's president raises minimum monthly wage to around \$172

CAIRO (AP) — Egypt's president on Tuesday raised the minimum monthly wage to about \$172, a move meant to ease the burdens of Egyptians hurt by painful austerity measures in recent years.

President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi announced in a statement that the minimum monthly wage in the country would be 2,700 Egyptian pounds (\$171.5) — a 12.5% increase from the current 2,400 Egyptian pounds (\$152.5). He also raised salaries of civil servants by about 13%. This is the third annual minimum wage increase since el-Sissi took office in 2014. The announcement came after el-Sissi met Tuesday with the prime minister, finance minister and other financial officials to discuss the next budget. Bonuses for school teachers were also announced. The statement did not say when the increases will be applied, but they are expected with the start of the new fiscal year in July.

The austerity measures were part of an ambitious economic reform program intended to revive Egypt's economy, mauled by years of political turmoil and violence following the 2011 uprising that toppled longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak.

The reforms were agreed on with the International Monetary Fund in exchange for a \$12 billion loan, which Egypt's government secured in 2016. □

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Hong Kong to kill 2,000 animals after hamsters get COVID-19

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong authorities said Tuesday that they will kill about 2,000 small animals, including hamsters, after several tested positive for the coronavirus at a pet store where an employee was also infected.

The city will also stop the sale of hamsters and the import of small mammals, according to officials from the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department. The pet shop employee tested positive for the delta variant on Monday, and several hamsters imported from the Netherlands at the store tested positive as well.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, animals do not appear to play a sig-



nificant role in spreading the coronavirus. But Hong Kong authorities said they are not ruling out transmission between animals and humans.

"We cannot exclude the possibility that the shopkeeper was in fact actu-

ally infected from the hamsters," said Edwin Tsui, a controller at the Centre for Health Protection.

While this coronavirus most likely jumped from animals to humans in the first place, the outbreak became a pandemic because the

virus spreads so easily between people. Minks are the only known animals to have caught the virus from people and spread it back, according to Dr. Scott Weese at Ontario Veteri-

nary College. Leung Siu-fai, director of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, said during a news conference that owners should keep hamsters at home, and not take them out.

"All pet owners should observe good personal hygiene, and after you have been in contact with animals and their food, you should wash your hands," he said.

"Do not kiss your pets," he added.

Customers who purchased hamsters from the store after Jan. 7 will be traced and be subject to mandatory quarantine and must hand over their hamsters to authorities to be put down, officials said. □

Europe narrows hunt for next astronauts, eyes crewed flights

BERLIN (AP) — The European Space Agency has narrowed down the candidate list for its next generation of astronauts, including dozens who have a physical disability.

The agency announced last year that it had received a record number

of 22,589 applicants from people hoping to become the continent's next generation of space travelers. ESA said Tuesday it has reduced these to fewer than 1,400 including 29 of whom have a physical disability and hoped to cut the shortlist down to several

tens of candidates by the end of the year for the four to six positions on its astronaut training program.

The agency's director-general, Josef Aschbacher, said the selection process would be accompanied by a feasibility study to determine the implications of choosing candidates with disabilities "but, yes, we are committed at ESA to open space to everyone."

ESA has for decades relied on its Russian and American counterparts to launch astronauts into space. Currently the agency has several places booked on American commercial launches. But Aschbacher said Europe may finally get its own crewed spacecraft if ESA member states approve the idea at a meeting later this year. □



infini
by Urvin Croes

Taste limitless possibilities at Infini, where Chef Urvin Croes and his team explores without boundaries and steps with both feet outside of the box to create his most sensational dishes yet. This meticulously designed restaurant located inside Blue Residences on scenic Eagle Beach is a chef's table concept with limited seating where diners are able to interact with the staff and other guests alike throughout the evening.

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Update COVID-19 as per January 19, 2022

ORANJESTAD – Here is the latest update on the ongoing COVID situation in Aruba.

On January 18 2022, Aruba registered 362 new cases, of which 26 were non-residents. The number of active positive cases is 1.231, whereas the average daily cases over the past seven days total 391.

The positivity rate stands at 63%.

Hospitalizations:

There are currently 51 persons hospitalized of which 4 are in the ICU. In Colombia there are 6 persons in ICU. Due to lack of staff at the hospital they have to send patients over to Colombia for treatment.

The measures are as follows since of December 30, 2021

- Curfew: NO Curfew
- Closing Time: 12:00 am for all business for the exception of Casino's which can stay open till 1:00 am
- Restaurants: Max. 6 people per table.
- Social Activities and Sports: Max. people: 60 indoors, 75 outdoors.
- Funerals: Max. people: 75 (if the space is adequately large

enough)

- Area Ban 7:00 pm - 5:00 am
- Nightlife: Dancing is not permitted
- Entertainment: Max 5 musicians on stage.
- Gathering Ban: Max. 6 people.
- Shopping: 1 person per family

The following measures remain applicable:

- Masks: Use of masks is mandatory inside at all establishments.
- Alcohol: Ban of alcohol on public roads: 24 hours.
- Social Distancing: Continue maintaining social distance.

New isolation and quarantine guidelines

The Crisis Team, after thorough consideration of the different advice and analysis, has changed the isolation and quarantine guidelines. Once a person gets a positive SARS-CoV-2 test result, the person should isolate for five days and avoid contact with others in the household. The five days of isolation start on the date the person received the positive test result.

If after five days in isolation you still have symptoms, you must continue

to isolate until you no longer have symptoms. After 24 hours without any symptoms, the person should complete the form sent by email. Those living in the same house as the person who tested positive should quarantine for 5 days, starting on the day they had immediate contact with the person who tested positive and should wear masks at all times. The person who tested positive must inform others living in the same home about the positive test result. The isolation and quarantine protocols are included in the email sent to anyone who tests positive. Please be aware that the DVG will no longer contact those who tested positive or anyone living in the same household. The DVG urges those who tested positive to complete the form that sent by email and to provide information about everyone living in the same home that needs to quarantine.

Exceptions as of Jan 8, 2022

Persons that have received the booster shot (so all 3 vaccine shots) and persons that were infected with Covid within past 4 weeks no longer need to quarantine when a

housemate tested positive.

Adaptation of testing requirements to enter Aruba

As of January 18, 2022, non-resident travelers visiting Aruba have two testing options before boarding.

1. A PCR test is taken per the country of origin's risk level;
2. An Antigen lab-test within 24 hours of travel

You must upload the test results online on the ED card system. The introduction of the Antigen option facilitates the entire testing process travelers have to go through and makes it possible for more visitors to get their test results in time for their Aruba vacation. This option contributes to the growth of our tourism without increasing the risks of more covid infections. Travelers from high-risk countries still cannot test upon arrival but must show a negative PCR result before boarding.

Residents returning from the USA can get a (PCR) test at the airport upon arrival but can now also get an Antigen test within 24 hours of travel from the USA.□

DOW will remove water hyacinths from Bubali Plas

ORANJESTAD - The Department of Public Works (DOW), will start removing the water hyacinth from the Bubali Plas, with the approval from the Arikok National Park and Department of Nature and Environment.

Due to the magnitude of the Bubali Plas, the DOW has decided to use heavy equipment to complete the task more efficiently. It entails routine maintenance work carried out every year.

The cleanup of the water hyacinths helps maintain a good water flow and the water quality in the Bubali Plas. It also protects the flo-

ra and fauna of the Bubali Plas.

This maintenance work is vital for the habitat as the water hyacinths have grown out of control and are covering a big part of the water surface. It blocks the sun's light from reaching the water, which reduces the oxygen level in the water. Without this routine maintenance, the Bubali Plas will deteriorate to a level where the flora and fauna will also disappear.

The routine maintenance work will take between 2 and 4 weeks.□

Recycle Bin pilot project

ORANJESTAD – In connection with sustainable tourism and following the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, the Minister of Tourism and the ATA launched a recycling bin pilot project.

These recycling bins are placed strategically on the beach, which will elevate our tourism product. In the past, the Ministry of Tourism and the Tourism Product Enhancement Funds (TPEF) were responsible for the trash bins on the beaches. The TPEF initially explored this project and considered other alternatives in waste management that will contribute to sustainable tourism.

Unfortunately, in 2020, the TPEF could no longer contribute to this project due to a lack of funds. Back then, there were 100 waste bins along the beaches. To keep this project running, the ATA jumped on board with funds.

Now, to help develop our tourism product, there are 22 recycling bins available. In 2021, they searched for different options to re-install these trash bins back on the beach while complying with the existing requirements, including new requirements for recycling aluminum, steel, and plastics.

It also includes the recy-

cling of bottles by local companies. These recycling bins are new and designed with the colors of the Aruba flag.

The sponsors of these recycling containers are local companies and include the sponsor's logo.

It is essential to dispose of your trash by putting them in containers and not on the beach. Keep in mind that this waste that ends up on the beach will eventually end up in the ocean with all devastating consequences for marine life.

Tourism is the driving force of our economy, and that is why we should invest in it and take care of it.□

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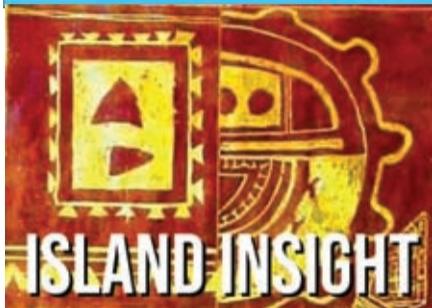
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Article by Etnia Nativa

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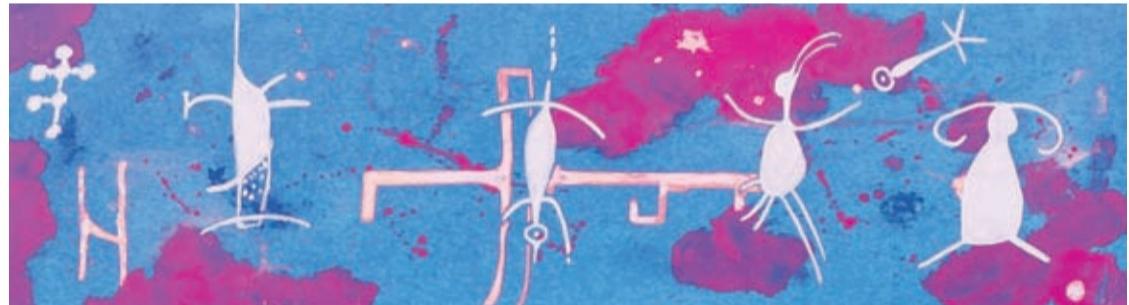
Etnia Nativa is close to high rise Hotels



Aruba's rocks engravers

Together we all can be Aruba's rangers, guardians of our patrimony. Let's create a consciousness that rock Art is our heritage; yes, much more than just meaningless doodles made by our Aruban fore fathers. Contrary to popular belief it was not created by some underdeveloped cannibal inhabitants of mythical epoch, it does not reflect buried treasure maps. Neither were they meant to just scare demons or bad spirits away. What rock Art in general does provide is means of understanding the sacred as well as the mundane perspective of life "in our case" with what prehistoric Amerindian cultures as a community could regionally and insular have experienced by means of rock art expressions and practices relating to it.

What interesting is that the official native rock artist was often a mystical Medicine Man, teacher, the color pigment mixer and a herb expert, however most probably because of his knowing and communal healing powers and communication with the supernatural world. A continuation of the early shamanic and endemic believes of most tribal societies, most likely remanence which survived from before the migrations crossing Beringia over twenty thousand years ago.



Pecking into the rock to create Petroglyphs was a method to accomplish with a hammer stone or stone chisel. Different pecking techniques created different styles. Incising or scratching with a sharp tool was also practiced. Incised designs are more expressive and detailed than pecked designs. Pictographs are usually created on light colored granite, protected from the elements, like on a Quartz Diorite surfaces or on limestone walls and caves ceilings. Stylized animals, humans and geometric object designs are common subjects. Pictograph pigments and binders were probably obtained from soot, vegetal pigments, blood or pulverized mineral pigment or ochers. While Sea snails could have provided a purple reddish stain. Binders were used to stabilize the coloring material and allow it to stick to the rock. The colors generally used were red, orange, white and black. Red pigment probably came from hematite or iron oxide; orange from a combination of hematite, ocher, lichen or Brazil wood.

Other sources of pigment included white clay, silica, gypsum, chalk, calcium carbonate, and charcoal. Pastels were created from clay mixed with other minerals. Water was used to create consistency but the binding agent

could be anything from saliva, to vegetal juices and vegetal oils, to a mix of water and calcium powder, tree gums, even egg shells or fresh guano were employed in many regions of the world. The surface of the rock was sometimes smoothed and abraded in preparation for painting. Tools were sticks or probably brushes made from the tips of agave leaves chewed or beaten to remove the pulp, leaving vertical fibers for painting small solid areas, clear lines, and other fine details. Wider areas could be painted for example with a corn husk or cotton wrapped around the finger or even the finger itself depending on the time frame which these where made. Dots were applied with the fingertips. Entire hand prints could have been created using for example a stenciled design by spraying or blowing the paint around the hand that has been placed with spread fingers on the surface of the rock. □

Did you say that you love Aruba its origins and cultural heritage? Than this private encounter with our columnist anthropologist is just as you. Sessions created in a gorgeous setting for visitor with special interests. Appointment is required. etnianativa03@gmail.com or WhatsApp us 297 592 2702 for a private reservation.

Episode CXXXIX - 139

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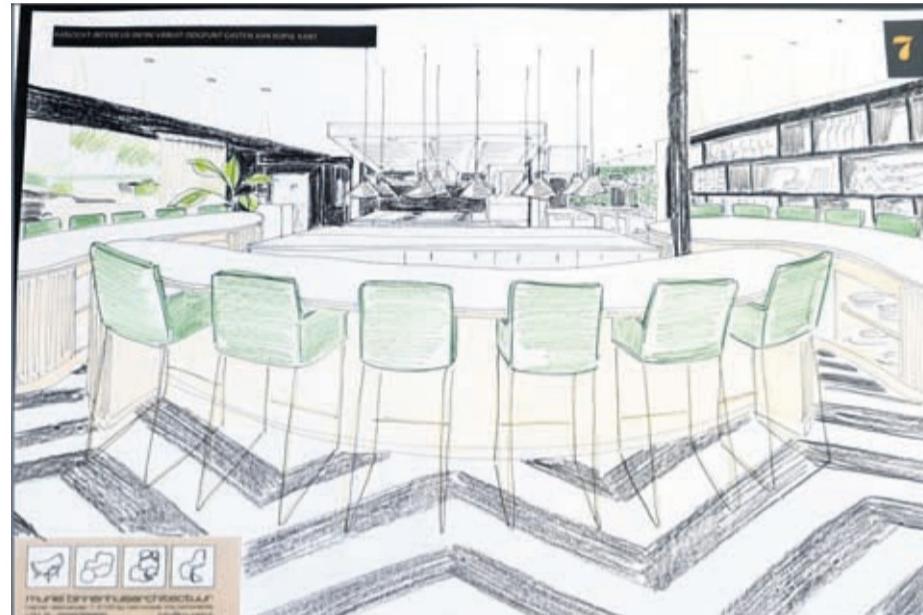
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New beginnings after the kitchen table and beyond with new restaurant: Infini by Chef Urvin Croes

PALM BEACH — After spearheading The Kitchen Table for five years, receiving notable recognitions in USA Today, The Daily Meal and earning the #1 spot on Tripadvisor's list of Fine Dining Restaurants in the Caribbean, Chef Urvin Croes has now moved on to higher heights. Infini, his new chef's table, which opened at the Blue Residences in November 2020, allows the Michelin-trained Aruban culinary artist to create gastronomic experiences unconfined by cultural or regional expectations. The former The Kitchen Table space has since been renovated into a suitable culinary studio to host this vision. In describing these changes, Croes says: "We opened up the entire kitchen and elevated the dining tables so guests have a front row stadium-like view of each step of the preparations. The spotlights, which we carefully choreograph, follow the plates' transition from blank canvas into culinary works of art."

"It is a flavor that you cannot define, but you can create."

He had been sitting on the first menu for over a year. Inspired by umami, one of the five basic tastes, and also Japanese for "essence of deliciousness", Chef Croes strived to organically produce this palate in each dish of the eight-course Chef's Impression. "It is a flavor that you cannot define, but you can create. Take our popular langoustine for example; we combined elements that are rarely paired together: the bitter, sour and salty flavors of the lemon cream, kombucha, green grapes, watercress



and achiote, fused with the sweet and delicate taste of the langoustine induce ultimate umami."

After hosting the first menu for three months, the Executive Chef introduced a second tour de force in February 2021 — this time a pescatarian menu dedicated to Lent, of which Croes has to say: "I wanted to focus on the finest fish in the world, they are the protagonists of this season." Visitors can experience the second Chef's Impression until May 2021, at which point Croes and his team will reveal exciting new flavors for the summer.

"Without a great team, there is no great chef"

"There is very little I can do by myself. Without a great team, there is no great chef", says Croes, while raving about the six young professionals sharing his kitchen. All graduates of Aruba's EPI College and familiar faces to the Chef as each one has completed their culinary internship under his guidance. In fact, Infini's Chef de Cuisine, Ashwin Maduro, was Urvin's very first

student, before relocating to Amsterdam, where he worked at several Michelin-starred restaurants, including &moshik (formally &Sam-houd Places). Having recently returned to Aruba, Chef Maduro is thrilled to be reunited with his first mentor and hopes to secure Aruba's space on the global map of unique culinary experiences. Similarly, after four years working in the two-Michelin starred restaurant Spectrum, Chef de Partie Moises Ramirez returned home to share his vast experience in formulating recipes with meticulous attention to detail and consistency. Further down the kitchen line, Chef de Partie Alvaro Yi, who has worked at the two-Michelin starred FG Restaurant, is all about expressing himself through cooking and plating to create art that you can eat. Mixologist Marc-Anthony Rannis brings eight years of experience in the fine dining industry to Infini. His fine craftsmanship is displayed in the unparalleled wine pairings and signature cocktails, which include his personally homemade syrups, garnishes and fresh local ingredi-

ents. Maître D' and Junior Sommelier Jessica Theysen, who previously managed renowned Chef Dennis Huwaë's Restaurant Daalder in Amsterdam, is a true storyteller. From the moment she serves the Salinity welcome drink and the culinary tale begins, she takes you on an adventure around the world to discover never-before-tasted combinations. Then, towards the end of the night, it is his time to shine — Pastry Chef Jean-Claude Werleman, that is. After spending the last two years perfecting his recipes in the Pastry Department of the Ritz Carlton Aruba, Werleman joins Infini to continue exploring his passion for experimenting with colors and bold flavors.

"It's time to show that Aruba is a culinary destination of its own"

"The goal is to leave our visitors speechless. The look on their faces whenever they take the first bite says it all and it is priceless", shares Croes, with a smile. Reclaiming the spot of number one restaurant in the Caribbean is also in sight, but this time he will not stop there. "In the end, we want Aruba to be recognized for its culinary mastery. We have trained the best culinary artists right here on the island and they have proven themselves internationally in the most renowned kitchens in the world. Now it is time to show that Aruba is a culinary destination of its own. Who knows where that will take us; hopefully to infinity and beyond."

Infini located at Blue Residences currently serves an eight-course Chef's Impression to up to 21 guests starting at 6:30PM. To make reservations visit www.infiniaruba.com or call +297-699-3982. □



infini
by Urvin Croes



Airlines renew warnings of travel disruption from 5G rollout

By DAVID KOENIG

AP Airlines Writer

The airline industry is raising the stakes in a showdown with AT&T and Verizon over plans to launch new 5G wireless service this week, warning that thousands of flights could be grounded or delayed if the rollout takes place near major airports.

CEOs of the nation's largest airlines say that interference from the wireless service on a key instrument on planes is worse than they originally thought.

"To be blunt, the nation's commerce will grind to a halt" unless the service is blocked near major airports, the CEOs said in a letter Monday to federal officials including Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, who has previously taken the airlines' side in the matter.

AT&T and Verizon plan to activate their new 5G wireless service Wednesday after two previous delays from the original plan for an early December rollout.

The new high-speed 5G service uses a segment of the radio spectrum that is close to that used by altimeters, which are devices that measure the height of aircraft above the ground. AT&T and Verizon say their equipment will not interfere with aircraft electronics, and that the technology is being safely used in many



other countries.

However, the CEOs of 10 passenger and cargo airlines including American, Delta, United and Southwest say that 5G will be more disruptive than they originally thought because dozens of large airports that were to have buffer zones to prevent 5G interference with aircraft will still be subject to flight restrictions announced last week by the Federal Aviation Administration. They add that those restrictions won't be limited to times when visibility is poor. "Unless our major hubs are cleared to fly, the vast majority of the traveling and shipping public will essentially be grounded. This means that on a day like yesterday, more than 1,100 flights and 100,000 passengers

would be subjected to cancellations, diversions or delays," the CEOs said.

The airline CEOs asked that the new 5G be barred within two miles of airport runways.

AT&T and Verizon declined to comment. A trade group for the telecom industry, CTIA, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The showdown between two industries and their rival regulators — the FAA and the Federal Communications Commission, which oversees radio spectrum — now threatens to further disrupt the aviation industry, which has been hammered by the pandemic for nearly two years.

This was a crisis that was years in the making.

The airline industry and the FAA say that they have tried to raise alarms about potential interference from 5G C-Band but the FCC has ignored them.

The telecoms, the FCC and their supporters argue that C-Band and aircraft altimeters operate far enough apart on the radio spectrum to avoid interference. They also say that the aviation industry has known about C-Band technology for several years but did nothing to prepare — airlines chose not to upgrade altimeters that might be subject to interference, and the FAA failed to begin surveying equipment on planes until the last few weeks. AT&T and Verizon spent billions of dollars for C-Band spectrum in a gov-

ernment auction run by the FCC, then spent billions more to build out new networks. In response to concern by the airlines, they agreed to delay launching the service from early December until early January. Late on New Year's Eve, Buttigieg and FAA Administrator Stephen Dickson asked the companies for another delay, warning of "unacceptable disruption" to air service.

AT&T CEO John Stankey and Verizon CEO Hans Vestberg rejected the request in a letter that had a scolding, even mocking tone. But they had second thoughts after intervention that reached the White House. They agreed to the second, shorter delay but implied that there would be no more compromises. That was followed by a deal in which the telecoms agreed to reduce the power of their networks near 50 airports for six months. In exchange, the FAA and the Transportation Department promised not to further oppose the rollout of 5G C-Band.

President Joe Biden praised the deal, but the airlines weren't satisfied with the agreement, regarding it as a victory for the telecoms that didn't adequately address their concerns about trying to land planes at airports where the new service would be active. □

Microsoft buys game maker Activision Blizzard for about \$70B

By MATT O'BRIEN
Associated Press

Microsoft is paying nearly \$70 billion for Activision Blizzard, the maker of Candy Crush and Call of Duty, as it seeks an edge in the fiercely competitive businesses of mobile gaming and virtual-reality technology.

The all-cash \$68.7 billion deal will turn Microsoft, maker of the Xbox gaming system, into one of the world's largest video game companies and help it compete with tech rivals such as Meta, formerly Facebook, in creating immersive virtual worlds for both work and play.

If the deal survives scrutiny from U.S. and European regulators in the coming months, it also could be one of the biggest tech acquisitions in history. Dell bought data-storage company EMC in 2016 for around \$60 billion.

Activision has been buffeted for months by allegations of misconduct and unequal pay, and that was addressed Tuesday by Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella in a conference call with investors.

"The culture of our organization is my number one priority," Nadella said, adding that "it's critical for Ac-

tivision Blizzard to drive forward on its" commitments to improve its workplace culture. Activision disclosed last year it was being investigated by the Securities and Exchange Commission over complaints of workplace discrimination. That was after California sued the Santa Monica-based company in July, citing a "frat boy" culture that had become "a breeding ground for harassment and discrimination against women."

Activision CEO Bobby Kotick will retain his role, and he and his team will maintain their focus on



driving efforts to further strengthen the company's culture and accelerate business growth.

Wall Street saw the acquisition as a big win for Activision Blizzard Inc. and

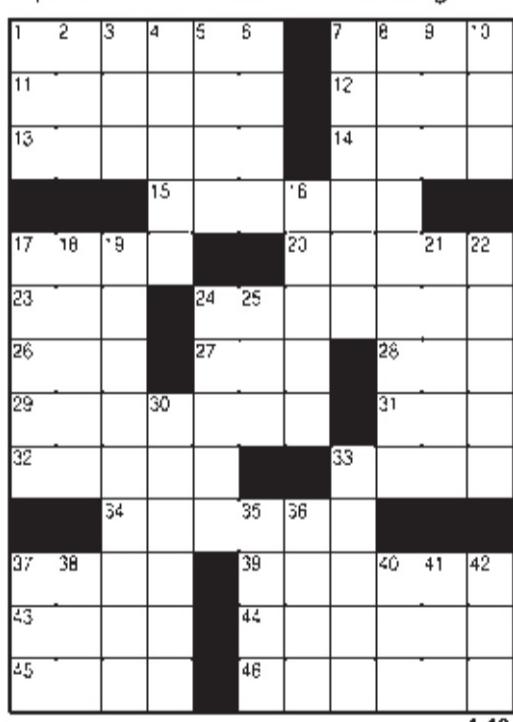
shares soared 27% in early trading Tuesday, making up for losses over the past six months since California's discrimination lawsuit was filed. Shares of Microsoft slipped less than 1%. □

CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS DOWN

- 1 Heathens 1 Okra unit
 7 Guitar boosters 2 Top pitcher
 11 Spotted cat 3 Salon stuff
 12 Aim 4 Wide awake
 13 Strike out 5 Staff symbol
 14 Pretentious 6 Dance move
 15 Meal 7 Tennis star Andre
 20 Putting to work 8 Completely ashamed
 23 Spanish gold 9 Contrived
 24 Evergreen tree 10 Devious
 26 Army address 11 Mom's sisters
 27 Small worker 12 Derby prize
 28 Hot blood 13 Ballot
 29 Manor settings 14 Ballot
 31 Cain raiser 15 Ballot
 32 Polish 16 Ballot
 33 Unspoiled spot 17 Ballot
 34 Dressy 18 Ballot
 37 Bill stamp 19 Ballot
 39 Overrun 20 Ballot
 43 Olympics weapon 21 Ballot
 44 Rooftop shooter 22 Ballot
 45 Cincinnati team 23 Ballot
 46 Wine expert 24 Ballot

**Yesterday's answer**

1-19

A X Y D L B A A X R
 is L O N G F E L L O W

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

1-19

CRYPTOQUOTE

M V F E S A Q S Q W X E D Y P S F V Y E
 T P C Q S O Q E E A P Q W Q M Y E
 D V F E O S Q H V G T V S Y E X J K K
 Y T V Y D Q O O V D — V K W V D O .
 K V Y Y V D W P S

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: ENNUI, FEELT ON THE PROPER OCCASIONS, IS A SIGN OF INTELLIGENCE — CLIFTON FADIMAN

Colombian author García Márquez had secret Mexican daughter



By ASTRID SUÁREZ
BOGOTA, Colombia (AP)

— For decades renowned Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez kept the public from knowing about an intimate aspect of his life: He had a daughter with a Mexican writer, with whom he had an extramarital affair in the early 1990s. The closely guarded secret was published by Colombian newspaper El Universal on Sunday and confirmed to the Associated Press by two relatives of the Nobel Prize-winning author, who is famous for novels like One Hundred Years of Solitude and Love in the Time of Cholera. García Márquez died in Mexico City in 2014, where thousands of his readers lined up to see his casket in a concert hall. He was married for more than five decades to Mercedes Barcha and the couple had two children named Rodrigo

and Gonzalo. They lived in Mexico City for much of their lives.

El Universal said that in the early 1990s García Márquez had a daughter with Susana Cato, a writer and journalist who worked with García Márquez on two movie scripts and who also interviewed him for a 1996 magazine story. Cato and García Márquez named their daughter Indira: She is now in her early 30s and uses her mother's surname. Shani García Márquez, one of the writer's nieces, told the AP that she had known for years about her cousin Indira, but had not mentioned her to the media because her parents always asked her to be discrete about her uncle's personal life.

Gabriel Eligio Torres García, who is also a nephew of the Colombian writer, said he has been in touch with Indira Cato through social

media, though he has never met her in person.

"My cousins Rodrigo and Gonzalo told me about her casually during a reunion," he said.

Other members of García Márquez's family, cited by El Universal, said they had not spoken about the writer's daughter previously out of "respect" for Mercedes Barcha who died in August 2020. □



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 WK 7 and 14 - all views

GOLD SEASON

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 2 Bed Garden view \$6,000
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Caribbean Mercantile Bank N.V.
Acc. #23951903
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Boost in Women's Open purse, are men's majors next?

By DOUG FERGUSON

AP Golf Writer

HONOLULU (AP) — The U.S. Women's Open is nearly doubling its prize money to \$10 million, an announcement that was celebrated across golf and genders.

The LPGA Tour this week starts its 73rd season of running a league all on its own, and no one begrudges the players finally getting paid big money for its biggest major, or the plan for them to play at storied courses.

"My first thought was, 'Good for them.' It's great to see the women's game getting the attention it deserves," said Webb Simpson, who won the U.S. Open in 2012 when the purse for the men was \$8 million. "I think they're in a great spot."

Even so, it wasn't long before Simpson and other men raised a question that has been brewing for several years and gained renewed traction with the Women's Open deal.

What does this mean for them?

The year after Simpson won his U.S. Open, the USGA signed a 12-year television contract with Fox Sports worth just over \$1 billion. The deal began in 2015, and the prize money for the U.S. Open that year was



\$10 million, only \$2 million more than when Simpson won.

"My next thought was if they're doing that, great," Simpson said. "But I think the players have a general understanding of how much money they make at each U.S. Open. I would like it go way up. I'd like to see ours double. We're seeing The Players Championship at \$20 million this year. I think the tour has put a healthy pressure on the majors to increase as well."

"Here's the deal," he said. "We all know they have it, or the ability to do it without compromising their busi-

ness model. As a player, it makes us happy not so much that it's more money, but I feel like they're showing us respect."

It's not just the USGA, which is getting attention because of what it announced for the women. The U.S. Open purse last year was \$12.5 million, the largest among majors. The Masters and British Open offered \$11.5 million, while the PGA Championship purse was \$12 million. The PGA Tour this year has seven events worth \$12 million or more.

The announcement is a not-so-subtle way for the

tour — especially with The Players going to \$20 million — to motivate the majors to raise their stakes.

"They want to do that because it's our flagship event, but I think what I've heard from the tour is it also should continue to push the majors to match us because of the caliber of tournament they should be," Jordan Spieth said. "The purse should represent that."

At the heart of the conversation is how much money the majors are making from PGA Tour players at their championships.

Income from the U.S. Open

helps pay for the other 15 events the USGA runs this year, all of which lose money. It's no different with the PGA of America or The R&A or even Augusta National, which runs three amateur events and the Drive, Chip and Putt for kids.

Brandt Snedeker first started beating the prize money drum in a players meeting at Torrey Pines after the USGA's television deal with Fox. He believes if PGA Tour players are responsible for the majority of the USGA income, they should know where it goes.

He isn't expecting a big increase this year from any of the majors, no matter how high the prize money at the PGA Tour climbs.

"That's been the tour policy for so long," Snedeker said. "Instead of addressing the elephant in the room — four tournaments we have no control over — keep punching up The Players to push them to keep up with us. They've always been lagging behind The Players. I don't know at what point they have to start catching up." The USGA annual meeting is Feb. 19, which is the same week the PGA Tour is playing for a \$12 million purse at the Genesis Invitational. □

Olympic athletes urged by activists not to criticize China

By GRAHAM DUNBAR

AP Sports Writer

GENEVA (AP) — Athletes at the Beijing Olympics were urged by human rights activists Tuesday to avoid criticizing China because they could be prosecuted.

The International Olympic Committee has said ath-

letes will have freedom of speech at next month's Winter Games when speaking to journalists or posting on social media. However, the Olympic Charter rule that prohibits political protests at medal ceremonies also requires "applicable public law" to be followed.



The IOC has not yet publicly committed to how athletes who speak out would be protected, activists said in a briefing hosted by Human Rights Watch.

"Silence is complicity and that's why we have concerns," said Rob Koehler, the director general of the Global Athlete group. "We know the human rights record and the allowance of freedom of expression in China, so there's really not much protection."

The IOC has not responded to requests in recent days to clarify how Chinese law could apply at the Beijing Games, which open on Feb. 4.

"Chinese laws are very vague on the crimes they can use to prosecute people's free speech," Human

Rights Watch researcher Yaqiu Wang said, citing potential offenses of provoking trouble or inciting subversion.

China's treatment of its Muslim-majority Uyghur people and polices toward Tibet, Hong Kong and Taiwan have come under increased scrutiny ahead of the Olympics. China also drew criticism following the near-total disappearance from public view of tennis player Peng Shuai.

She wrote in a social media post that she was sexually assaulted by a former senior member of the ruling Communist Party.

Two-time Olympic cross-country skier Noah Hoffman said he knew the United States team was now shielding its athletes from

facing questions.

"That makes me upset and I am scared for their safety when they go to China," Hoffman said. "They can speak out when they get back."

Activists cited the cases of Peng, wrestler Navid Afkari, who was executed in Iran in 2020, and the treatment of athletes by the authoritarian regime in Belarus as examples where the IOC could have done more to protect athletes.

Amid concerns about data privacy and spying in China, some Olympic teams in Europe have also advised athletes not to take personal telephones and laptops to Beijing. "Any person with a sane mind who hears all these things," Koehler said, "must have concerns." □

Women's hockey league to increase salary cap, add 2 teams

By JOHN WAWROW AP
Hockey Writer

The Premier Hockey Federation is more than doubling each team's salary cap to \$750,000 and adding two expansion franchises next season in a bid to capitalize on the wave of attention women's hockey traditionally enjoys following the Winter Olympics.

The PHF's announcement on Tuesday of its board of governors' commitment to invest more than \$25 million over the next three years is also considered a major step in attempting to thaw its relationship with United States and Canadian national team players, who have balked at joining North America's lone professional women's hockey league.

"It's an amazing investment by the ownership, and it really reaffirms the strength of their commitment to being a difference-maker in women's hockey," PHF Commissioner Ty Tumminia told The Associated Press. "It's important for us to advance to our next season and be crystal clear about the direction we're headed, and what framework will be so that all athletes can make an informed decision about their careers," Tumminia added, noting the timing of the announcement comes two weeks before the Winter Games open in Beijing.

The six-team PHF is mov-



ing forward with plans to establish a team in Montreal and, without disclosing where, adding another expansion franchise in the United States.

The boost in the cap from \$300,000 this season will lead to an average salary of \$37,500 based on a 20-player minimum roster or \$30,000 for a league-maximum 25-player roster. There will be no limits placed on a player's salary as long as the team's overall payroll remains under the cap.

The cash influx will also lead to the PHF providing full health-care benefits to its players, improving facilities and increasing the number of practices. Players will also gain a 10% equity in their respective team and

have control over their likeness for marketing opportunities.

"This is the time to double-down," PHF board of governors chairman John Boynton said. "We think this is a giant step forward of making it possible for the best women's hockey players to earn a living playing the game they love."

The league doubled its salary cap already from \$150,000 a year ago, while also adding an expansion team in Toronto.

The PHF has made numerous sponsorship and broadcasting inroads over the past year, including having games aired on ESPN-Plus in the U.S. and Canada's TSN.

Tumminia noted the league



was able to generate those agreements based on this being an Olympic year.

"This is a very pivotal time in women's hockey. There's no denying the impact the Olympics have on the interest in the women's game and how the landscape can change after Beijing," she said.

The PHF currently has teams based in Boston, Toronto, Monmouth Junction, New Jersey, St. Paul, Minnesota, Danbury, Connecticut, and Buffalo, New York.

The fast-tracked approach follows two years in which the PHF overhauled its business and ownership model, and underwent a rebranding by changing its name from the National Women's Hockey League last sum-

mer.

PHF teams are now privately owned, though some ownership groups control more than one franchise.

Upon being founded as a start-up four-team venture in 2015 by Dani Rylan Kearny, the league previously controlled all its franchises and relied on outside investors to make up the revenue gap from ticket and merchandise sales to pay for salary, travel and administrative costs.

The instability of the business model led to the NWHL slashing players salaries by more than half in its second season. The move led to a distrust among players, some of whom bolted to play for the Canadian Women's Hockey League, which folded in May 2019.

The CWHL's demise led to the world's top players forming the Professional Women's Hockey Players' Association in a united bid to establish a single North American professional league — ideally backed by the NHL — with a long-term sustainable economic model.

The PWHPA has spent the past two years holding a series of barnstorming weekend events called the "Dream Gap Tour" across North America.

Tumminia believes the PHF's latest investment, and the inclusion of health-care benefits, meets the PWHPA's vision. □

Murray's first playoff start a nightmare for Cardinals

By JOE REEDY
AP Sports Writer

INGLEWOOD, Calif. (AP) — Kyler Murray's first NFL playoff start quickly turned into a nightmare.

The dynamic quarterback and his Arizona Cardinals teammates had about the worst start imaginable in Monday night's 34-11 loss to the Los Angeles Rams in the NFC wild-card round. By the time the Cardinals got their initial first down, they were trailing 21-0 midway through the second quarter.

"We didn't even make it a game," said Murray, who

completed 19 of 34 passes for 137 yards and two interceptions. "I put a lot on my shoulders. To play the way I did was disappointing."

The Cardinals went three-and-out on their first four possessions, the first time that's happened in a playoff game in at least 10 seasons. They were outgained 180-40 in the first half and averaged just 1.5 yards per play, the second-worst average in a playoff game over the last 20 seasons.

Murray was under pressure from the start. He was sacked twice in the first half and was nearly

brought down for a safety in the second quarter before throwing an ill-advised pass that was picked off by David Long for a 3-yard touchdown return to make it 21-0.

Murray was unable to find any success throwing downfield. He completed only one pass beyond 15 air yards on eight attempts, and 11 of his 34 attempts were passes behind the line of scrimmage.

"It just got out of hand early. You have to be able to run the ball on those guys. When you get into a passing game, they have three



of the best pass rushers along with good players on the back end," Murray said. The Cardinals came into the game 10th in the league in rushing, averaging 122 yards per game, but were held to a season-low 61 against the Rams. Murray had a season-low two rushing attempts and gained six yards. □



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